

TACT Fostering - North West

The Adolescent And Children's Trust

Innovation House, Coniston Court, PO Box 137, Blyth, NE24 9FJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust) is a charitable organisation which operates across England, Scotland and Wales. The agency moved to an entirely home-based service in October 2021.

The agency offers short-term, long-term, respite and emergency care. The agency can care for children with disabilities, groups of brothers and sisters, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and parents and children.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 33 approved fostering households and 52 children were being cared for in these households.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since 2016.

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 December 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 4 March 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children's lives are enriched by the love and care they receive from their foster carers. Children make exceptional progress as a result of the quality of care they experience. Children are welcomed into their fostering households and embraced as part of their foster family. One child said of her foster carers, 'They make me feel happy inside and out. They make me feel this because they are kind and care about me.'

Children with additional and complex needs are cared for by skilled foster carers who understand and meet their individual needs. As a result, these children flourish. Carers are provided with specialist one-to-one and group support to enable them to care for children to a high standard. These foster carers and children have the opportunity to meet up with other families on an annual residential break provided by the agency. This gives children new experiences and builds their social and communication skills alongside their peers.

The foster carers of children who have come to this country seeking asylum, work hard to understand and meet children's cultural and religious needs and understand their trauma. Carers and supervising social workers work with the agency's education support service to identify educational placements that will meet the specific needs of each child. This means that children attend schools with experience of educating unaccompanied children and have the additional support in place to help them make progress academically. Although children have access to translation services in key meetings, the agency is not yet providing written documents to meet the needs of all children who do not read or speak fluent English.

The educational attainment of all children is a key focus of the agency. The agency's education support service provides a high quality of advice and oversight for children of all ages to ensure that their educational, training and employment needs are met. Annual education review meetings take place with agency education staff and supervising social workers. Education staff have a detailed oversight of children's progress and any areas of concern. This ensures that intervention is put in place at the earliest opportunity to support children's learning. Foster carers and agency staff have high aspirations for the children in their care.

Children have lots of opportunities to have their voices heard. Children meet together regularly with agency staff to go on activities. This gives them the opportunity to talk to each other and staff about their wishes and feelings. Children have one-to-one time with the agency's emotional well-being practitioner who provides them with a safe space to speak about their experiences and to receive support to understand and manage their feelings.

The excellent quality of care that children experience is informed by the agency's developing model of therapeutic and trauma-informed care. The agency's

commissioned clinical psychologist has recently been joined by an in-house therapeutic social worker and children's emotional well-being practitioner. The therapeutic team provides foster carers and children with bespoke support to understand and respond to children's past trauma and emotional health needs. This child-centred practice contributes to many children remaining with their foster families throughout their childhoods.

Children benefit from the agency's understanding of, and commitment to, the importance of children having lifelong relationships with people who are important to them. A number of children are cared for alongside their brothers and sisters. Foster carers support children to spend time with their birth families and other important people in their lives. A number of children remain with their foster families into adulthood. One foster carer said of their foster child, 'We love him like our own. Our love for him is not going to change'. The quality of relationships which children are helped to develop provides them with a sense of security, identity and belonging.

The agency has developed an innovative service, TACT Connect. This provides children preparing to leave care and adults previously fostered through the agency with ongoing support, guidance and opportunities to socialise with care experienced peers. The service aims to give these children and adults a sense of community. It demonstrates the agency's commitment to the children it has cared for throughout their lives.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children say that they feel safe living in their foster families. They develop trusting relationships with their foster carers, and this underpins the progress they make.

Children have regular opportunities to speak to their foster carer's supervising social workers, in the home and on community activities. This gives children additional access to trusted adults.

Supervising social workers are not always completing their annual unannounced visits to foster homes within required timescales. These are missed opportunities to complete visits which provide additional safeguards for children.

Foster carers understand children's risks and vulnerabilities. Although the frequency of children presenting high-risk behaviours, such as going missing from home, is extremely low, carers are aware of the potential risks and understand how to respond.

Foster carers support children to manage their feelings in a safe and effective way. In the very rare instances where physical intervention is needed for children, there is a clear rationale for this. Foster carers receive high quality individualised training to ensure their responses keep children safe. Where appropriate, foster carers work with the therapeutic team to develop ways of keeping children safe which does not involve physically holding children.

Although foster carers know how to care for children and keep them safe, written safer care plans are not in place for all children. Children do not receive an age-appropriate safer care plan to help them to understand the expectations of their fostering household. These shortfalls in records have not impacted on safeguarding practices but are missed opportunities to ensure that children and carers have access to clear, written information.

Foster carers have a good understanding of safeguarding processes and recognise when information needs to be shared with the agency and children's placing authorities. Managers and agency staff understand their responsibilities and there are good working practices in place with local authority designated officers to ensure that procedures are followed to keep children safe.

The agency has thorough recruitment processes in place. The necessary checks are undertaken to satisfy managers that all adults employed by, or working with, the agency, are suitable to work with children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers, locally and nationally, are highly skilled and experienced. They drive the child-led approach of the agency which is evident throughout the work of foster carers and all staff, irrespective of their role.

Leaders and managers are known to children and foster carers. They join in with activities and social events. This reflects the inclusive nature of the agency.

There is a strong learning culture within the agency and a desire to innovate. Reflection and learning is embedded throughout working practice. Where learning can be taken from practice, leaders and managers are keen to engage with this. This attitude of learning filters down through the agency, with staff proactively seeking reflective discussion when needed.

The fostering panel and agency decision-maker make timely and carefully considered decisions about people's suitability to foster children. The agency benefits from independent panel members with in-depth knowledge, expertise and experience of working with children and foster carers. Panel members include people with care experience and from education, health and social work backgrounds, as well as an adoptive parent.

The agency's move to remote working for staff has been managed well. The use of virtual 'office' days, when staff know their colleagues will be available online, keeps staff connected and feeling supported. Staff are provided with regular supervision which offers the opportunity for professional discussion and reflection on practice.

Foster carers benefit from a stable and skilled team of supervising social workers. Supervising social workers have the capacity within their workload to provide carers with one-to-one time and give them the levels of support they need. The team works very well together. They know each other's foster carers and children. As a

result, foster carers receive an appropriate and knowledgeable response if they need to contact the agency out of office hours or in the absence of their allocated worker.

The agency has a strong and effective focus on the wellbeing of foster carers. Foster carers have regular social activities, paid for by the agency, where they can meet up, without staff, to talk and gain support from one another. Leaders and managers provide additional financial support to carers at times of financial difficulty. This reflects the agency's commitment to supporting and retaining their foster carers and valuing the contribution they make to children's lives.

Developments within the agency are informed by trauma -informed research. Training for staff and foster carers is delivered by skilled and experienced external practitioners. In addition, staff are provided with the opportunity to develop and deliver training to share their professional knowledge on topics that are helpful for foster carers and support their care of children.

Without exception, foster carers speak highly of the agency and the support they receive. One carer said, 'Fostering is life changing for all involved. We feel valued as foster carers'. Another carer commented, 'From the application process, through the training, to the regular supervisions, and therapeutic support groups, we have constantly felt supported.'

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that unannounced visits to foster carers are completed within timescales and in line with the agreed policy of the agency. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that every child has a safer care plan and children should be provided with their own age-appropriate version of their safer care plan. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.1)
- The registered manager should ensure that the service has the facilities to work with children for whom English is not their first language. Oral and written information should be made available in the language of the child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.12)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC047548

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Inspectors

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